

Conversation I

Sound & Performance as Protest: A Conversation with Muyassar Kurdi and Verónica Mota

by Marlo DeLara

“Against the backdrop of a corporate style arts sector, the decision to explore new forms or simply make work that intervenes in the existing system can be a radical political act.”

– Chris Garrard, ‘Creating Resistance: Art, Music, and Activism’ [1]

Introduction

As a sound performance art practitioner, academic, and activist, I am continually looking for the ways for my different roles to nourish one another directly. In the past several years, the conversation in feminist electronic experimental sound/music/arts circles evolved into a well networked community of academics and practitioners investigating ways to intervene in institutional gender barriers. Embracing inclusivity, the multiplicity of voices and situated knowledges are welcomed. The enthusiastic participation of women continues. Self-naming one’s self

as a feminist thinker, artist, and/or musicians allowed for a more holistic presence embracing multiple aspects simultaneously. In other words, the personal and political realms for women in sound are being enunciated and reverberating internationally. In the recent past and in less conscious music spaces in the present, overt expression of subjectivity put one’s work at risk of public interrogation; a devaluing of one’s project/works by an association with the words ‘woman’, ‘feminist’ and recognition of one’s own racial/ethnic naming. In this article, I will introduce the work of sound performance artists Verónica Mota and Muyassar Kurdi. The dialogue surrounds each artist’s creative practices, how they perceive their work as acts of resistance, and how their individual lives influence their creative works.

In light of the popularity of conservative parties throughout the world aiming to derail social justice agendas, the representation of the multiplicity of voices and narratives becomes critically important. It is not enough to say one disagrees with the politics of Trump and Brexit but rather to see this public mass roar of dissent as assembled from diverse and separate individuals. In other words, this merging of the lived experiences and the iteration of political beliefs from the marginalized have become more consistently co-represented. This space of

resistance is of utmost importance in that it embraces intersubjective investigations, valuing both social and personal experience. In 1984, Audre Lorde outlined the importance of recognizing difference in solidarity actions:

Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged [2].

Lorde asks us to interrogate our own intersubjective positioning because it is within our individual psyche and our own hidden social prejudices, such as homophobia and racism, the real political work can begin. This psychoanalytical inward searching can be assisted by the creation and exhibition of art and music. Narratives in creative forms demand attention from those who enter the space. Through contact with a cultural text, one is challenged to think with outside their current worldview in attempts to understand and approach the art object. Through art, ‘we can learn about our individual prejudices not only to expunge them, but to illuminate them.’ [3]

Non-white women sound artists

experimental performers sociohistorically lack representation and are differentially (em)powered. In Sharmi Basu’s groundbreaking work on decolonizing sound, she states that otherness is integral to avant-garde and that an application decolonizing methods of deconstruction for musical culture is necessary. This must not be noted without the evident, that the socioeconomic challenges that

marginalize and capitalize upon the female body, the idea of the feminine, the colored person, the other, and that body’s desire for social equity result in devastating gendered oppression that systematically erases women from history and represses women into submission. [4]

Basu asserts that ‘creative music is a means towards liberation’ and with political unrest and social injustices, communal suffering ensues instigating a revolt led by artistic creations.

In addition to enriching and complicating narratives, this artist conversation is to be read as a part of an uprising in which the making of sound art is recognized for its potency and usefulness in acts of resistance.

The Conversation

“Sounds are points of departure to realms of personal history, cultural memory, and political struggle.”

– Tara Rodgers, Pink Noises [5]

I chose sound performance artists Muyassar Kurdi and Verónica Mota due to the various arenas and dual/multiple cultural consciousness in which they work. I had met Muyassar Kurdi while she was on tour and we performed on the same bill. Her work was highly stylized in contrast to the noise lineups I had grown accustomed to. Verónica Mota became known to me through her organization Urban Arts Berlin which made open calls for submissions for compilations embracing women musicians. I submitted to one of her compilations and began to observe Urban Arts Berlin's woman centered curatorial projects abroad. I forged cyberfriendships through our mutual interests and a sharing of personal stories through social media.

While both are comfortably situated within the international DIY underground noise music, both are open to using artist residencies and funding bodies in order to continue to create. Though some of these attempts have been unsuccessful due to institutional preferential treatment of White practitioners and/or the unfeasibility of living wages during residencies, any economic options must be pursued. Simultaneously aware of the importance of self-management and self-promotion, neither hesitate to be vocal about their feminist beliefs and displeasure with mainstream misogynist world views and the capitalist structures working against artists. Their words acknowledge

their navigation through the constant whiteness and male power paradigms embedded in social relations. Their artist online presence(s) embrace personal and intimate thoughts as well as editorial commentary on the arts and music scenes. Statements regarding combatting the patriarchy and questioning authority are commonly placed at the forefront of communications. In our conversation, there were no overt discussions about race barriers but more so that living in a gendered and racialized world is a reality that keeps neither from continuing to create art.

While the electronic sound processes and technology used in both Kurdi and Mota's work is often associated with the 'noise' music genre, I think it is useful to see their experimental electronically processed work beyond the scope of genre. The term 'experimental' is being used to contrast it from the mainstream art and music. I agree with Joanna Demer's definition of experimental 'as anything that has departed significantly from norms of the time, but with the understanding that something experimental in 1985 could have inspired what was conventional by 1990'. [6] Pushing that further, these experimental works aim to transgress language that restricts interpretation and perhaps distances performer from the audience. While both have impressive discographies and continue to record, Muyassar Kurdi

and Verónica Mota see live performance as having a different valence that lends itself to immediacy and protest. Kurdi embraces the use of both recorded works such as film and improvised performance as integral to her overall creative processes and personal growth. As politically aware women, they harness their creative acts for 'those moments when the flow of activism emerges in a tangible form, are inherently performative.' [1]

Choosing a messaging platform to connect, I began by asking both New York based Muyassar Kurdi and Berlin based Verónica Mota to introduce themselves. My goal was to create a casual atmosphere in which they could speak honestly and unfiltered about their work and experiences with sound technology and its relationship to acts of resistance. This was to be an intimate conversational space where one could speak honestly about passions and individual expressions. I merely wanted to create an atmosphere to recognize them as they chose to represent themselves, their personal narratives relayed as they saw fit. For example, how did being a single mother effect Verónica Mota's work? Or how did Muyassar Kurdi see touring solo as a woman? For the sake of brevity, it is unfortunate not to be able to learn more of their personal lives. Yet there is a dynamic nature to the sharing of narratives and I feel I am more familiar of the dissonance and harmony of their lives.

Broaching the line between private and public, a crossing of intimate goals and social change was present throughout the exchange. While both artists teach workshops that are socially transformative, often empowering women to shed hindering societal programming and channel one's creativity from within, their personal spiritual transformation was of major concern. Calling back to Lorde, these choices to care for one's self is by nature political and an act of resistance. [7] Extending this further, being open to growth is a form of self-care.

I present both women as artists, colleagues, and sisters in troubled times and encourage readers to go beyond these brief synopses.

Verónica Mota: Technological Activism and Spiritual Openness

As [a] humanist I do not only talk about my personal journey...I don't like much to be ambivalent and meaningless. I like to reach people through communication and intellectual contents.
– Verónica Mota

Verónica Mota's sound and performance art tends to be 'storytelling oriented'. Her pieces are not to always be seen as total abstraction but to 'send a clear message across' that can be critical of the politics of the day. In live performance, Mota pushes past her audience's comfort zone by examining power dynamics. She describes effective performances as

'leaving a mark in my path... They have confront[ed] me with something and/or show me possibilities of being.' Her praise of direct action and clarity in execution and structure in artistic works is a mainstay of her aesthetic.

As organizer and founder of Urban Arts Berlin, 'a nonprofit organization promoting noncommercial works from all over the world', under which her online label and radio shows operate, Mota further takes direct action to shift programming and refocalize the role of women in music production. For Mota, networking and community, particularly amongst other women and the 'gay community', have been integral to managing these difficulties. Her professional roles are immediate methods to adjust gender attitudes in experimental music culture and technology.

While describing her workshops, Verónica Mota used the term 'technological activism'. To the artist, the phrase is a concrete strategy to subvert the dominant gender imbalance in music technology. Her approach to technological activism is derived from her own university experience in Mexico City where she studied philosophy and various social sciences. Her negative views are based on the elitism and class barriers obscuring knowledge within the academic institution. This led her to further develop technological workshops as an approach

to educational social justice:

...I distrust the academia because often academics ended in their middle-class circles talking about the important themes completely disconnected of reality. I dislike that. I think we have a responsibility towards people. Particularly when education is a privilege not everyone can access. I left the academia in order to learn from real people & their personal stories, among other things such as political events, etc...

While Mota did not originally work with women primarily, her sound technology workshops focus on 'female identified' [1] populations and those with less comfort with, as well as limited access to, technology. For example, Mota spoke of an upcoming event in which she is instructing refugee women on DJ software and hardware.

I focus on giving [in] depth but also on encouraging women to be creative and use the skills to express themselves, their stories, ideas, dreams and fears. I do also focus on helping women to work on their self-esteem. My pedagogical concept is complex. It is not only about how to plu[g] cables, connect interfaces and/or operate a machine. It goes far beyond that. It is about helping women to be present, to have a voice and to probe we can manage technology.

In short, for Verónica Mota, technology is a method of democratizing the arts and creative works beyond social institutional barriers.

... technology is a key element for creative expression, social interaction and political activism. Machinery, software and Internet are very valuable skills for resistance... If you combine both art & pedagogical practice we contribute to a new level of human rights & better relationships.



Figure 1: Verónica Mota

Mota describes her performances as ritualistic art. This due to her own personal transformation culled from various spiritual practices to learn more about herself and others, encouraging a more open world view.

I am Mexican with a strong Inigena and Afro heritage. When I was living and staying in Mexico I was completely rationalist. Interested only on Philosophy, Ethics, Politics, Economics and Sociology, to mention some areas. Once I moved to Germany, after a couple of years, a German introduced to me Mexican Shamanism. I was very skeptical after growing up under Catholicism. Metaphysic and the occult were not for me at that time. Today, thanks to my open mind and international meetings and research I found there are different areas of interpretation and understanding towards Shamanism... [in creative work] somehow, I have manage[d] to open some doors where magic appears and people are able to connect with me and others. Some kind of 'Let's kill the Ego' with noise and be fucking real. Let's open the Pandora box and organize a bit those feelings of pain and frustration. Yes, it hurts. Very, very much. But you are not the only one.

The cathartic effect of her noise performances serves to destabilize the ego and decrease the separateness felt in daily life. Mota describes a critical moment in which her ethnic associations were destabilized. As a migrant from Mexico, the colonial technology of Spain, Catholicism has deleted native religions. This is similar to my own story where the Philippines, a former colony of Spain as

well, has become the largest Christian nation in Asia. To combat my own inherited colonized mindset, I abandoned my Catholic roots. In Mota's spiritual journey, she has redefined, reclaimed, and enriched her understandings of her own motherland. These moments can be read as a personal form of decolonization. As Sharmi Basu explains, "decolonization (the process of restoring Indigenous identity) can be very personal." [8]

Muyassar Kurdi: Healing Community and Working though the Body

An act of resistance for me is learning to live and be in my body and dance has been a very healing force. Patriarchy is really eating me alive. —
Muyassar Kurdi

Muyassar Kurdi is an Arab American sound and performance artist, based in New York city. Contrasting from the often-saturated electronic processing in abstract noise/sound art, her work is self-aware and attentive to silence and present moment. Kurdi openly addresses timeless existential dilemmas and questions her own methodology in her pieces. When asked about the sound technologies used in her work, Kurdi responded

I am interested in technology and the body and how these two worlds overlap and inform each other. The devices create many textures and layers of atonal and microtonal sounds reacting to light and

movement. One may ask: what comes first the sound or the movement? And there is this in-between place of tension in my live performances in regard to the form. There is form like parameters with room for improvisation.

For Kurdi, the improvisational method is a way to be fully engaged with the performance and to contain the space. Her performances rely on non-linear explorations of her affective and bodily minds:

[T]o be present in the environment and I need it like I need the form which holds a focus, a contour which binds it together. I am an interdisciplinary artist; I use different modalities so form is important for seeing how to present them together. I am interested in the cinematic experience, a full expression using the body and voice which explores space, interacts, loves, challenges. Multi-modality is very important to my work; it is my vision to embody. It couldn't be any other way for me. I am interested in so much, and at the same time my work is very minimal. Maximal in the minimal, at that.

While being respected for her homemade electronics and electroacoustic compositions, Kurdi experiments with her own creative and bodily comfort zones. These experiments further gestate until born anew.



Figure 2: Muyassar Kurdi

Recently during my tour in Europe, I mostly sang unplugged with my electronics. I am interested in stripping down to the minimal. It challenges me to use my body in different ways, raise my sensitivity and awareness, and to think of light, architecture, and interaction with the audience. And of course, through improvisation comes form. I created pieces from improvised sessions that perhaps get reworked over and over again until they are far from the origin. Sometimes the sound just comes out and that's that; the piece is made in a moment. It is easy if you are open to it then everything just comes naturally and I prefer to work with intuition. In one of my collaborations, I am performing and recording with a cellist, Nicholas Jozwiak. We perform movement, voice, cello, and bass. We rehearse often and work heavily with form. At the same time, there is room for improvisation in almost everything we do. What is important is

that we stay connected with each other and listen deeply. Then we are never lost. In one of my collaborations, I am performing and recording with a cellist, Nicholas Jozwiak. We perform movement, voice, cello, and bass. We rehearse often and work heavily with form. At the same time, there is room for improvisation in almost everything we do. What is important is that we stay connected with each other and listen deeply. Then we are never lost.

It is this language about interconnectedness and mutual struggle that characterizes Muyassar Kurdi's work. While being very deeply located within her body experience, boundaries must stay permeable in order to expose a vulnerability central to her creative act. The boundaries that define her as a woman, as a human, as a performer, as a collaborator, as a co-occupier of mutual space and time – all are variables that Kurdi manages in performance. By recalling associations intending to create an agendered performer experience, or rather a body that pushes against the gender body assumptions, the audience must acknowledge their conceptual limitations. All the while, a live performance is immediately within an audience member's senses.

In my artistic process as an interdisciplinary artist, I tend to break down the walls between performer

and audience member as well as the borders that define gender and art disciplines. In my current performances, there is nothing ‘concrete’ in what I am doing - for example, I hardly use words in my singing, but my movement and vocalizations are very feminine and charged. So it is an act of protest and both men and women audience members are moved by my work, but it always sticks out to me when women approach me especially when traveling abroad because it never occurred to them that this kind of freedom existed for a woman...

Furthermore, this vulnerability serves not only her work but as a way to address the boundaries that disregard the violence and traumas endured living in contemporary society. By allowing the audience community to internally process the performance, Kurdi’s work becomes emancipatory to the viewer. By being present, one is central to the performance and yet marginal in intentional activity.

It’s always difficult doing something where you remain open and vulnerable but then get rejected. I just keep going, the act of perseverance, and a reminder of why I’m doing this at all. It’s a spiritual journey, and now I’m clear that it is one of healing the community too because I want to be ‘free’ but how am I free unless my neighbors are also free...

Postscript

I had my own political agenda in framing the conversation. As a non-white woman making sound art, inspired by Sharmi Basu’s work, I had hoped the discussion would encourage a sense of solidarity within me, being among my sisters. While I have found solace in feminist collectives, women of color are generally a minority within noise music and sound art. Yet every time inequalities and invisibilities are recognized, there is hope that the sense of being othered will feel less uncomfortable and more natural.

The conversation did achieve that but not in the way I had foreseen; rather, listening to both sonic artists articulate their own stories and creative processes catalyzed a need to frame this piece as a community action. The ‘artist struggle’ is well known but put within the context of current political unrest and sociohistorical gender barriers, the work of making art is more critical than ever to the individual and the social body. It nourishes our emotionally exhausted souls by allowing another method to exist and create. The sharing and talking about surviving these tumultuous times feeds the community of individually suffering marginalized peoples. In this way, it is a revolutionary act and a survival method. We must live through this. We must create. We must commune with others and extend our self-care to the larger community. I will leave this with Sarah Ahmed’s call to action:

In directing our care towards ourselves we are redirecting care away from its proper objects, we are not caring for those we are supposed to care for; we are not caring for the bodies deemed worth caring about. And that is why in queer, feminist and anti-racist work self-care is about the creation of community, fragile communities, assembled out of the experiences of being shattered. We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other. This is why when we have to insist, I matter, we matter, we are transforming what matters. [9]

Biography

Marlo De Lara is a sound performance artist and experimental filmmaker currently pursuing a PhD in Cultural Studies at the University of Leeds. Her research addresses subjects relating to feminism, representation of marginalized populations, and creative work as political action. As curator and organizer of the Ladyz in Noyz (LIN) international compilation series/collective, she continues to promote emerging artists and musicians who are women.

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